

Katakana-English in a World of Englishes: Identification and Recognition

Robert WALKER

In the past 50 years, the term “English in Japan” has generally referred to American English (business, social communication and entertainment) or British English (classical literature and culture), with education wavering between the two source countries. English loan-words have been welcomed into Japan at an unprecedented rate, now comprising 10–15% of everyday Japanese vocabulary and 80–90% of computer-related vocabulary (Olah, 2007). The linguistic importance of Katakana, used to write loan-words, has greatly increased. Katakana-English (KE), the Japanese method of expressing loan-words, has developed into a robust, unique sub-language with characteristics of both English and Japanese. But, just as an unacknowledged child faces crises of identity and ability, KE has grown up different from its parents, able to relate to both at a limited level, but unsure of being understood by either.

Now an established part of Japanese language, KE must look to English in other nations for part of its identity. But English in other nations does not provide a single focus for comparison. As English has spread around the world in the past three centuries, what has emerged is no single unified ‘world English’, but rather localized varieties that evolved in each region. The study of these local varieties, a thriving research field named World Englishes (WEs), now includes Japan as a region with a localized variety of English (Kachru, 2005). But what is a World English (WE)? How is a WE identified? What does it mean to be a member of the family of WEs? What are the social or pedagogical implications?

This essay has three related aims: first, review the historic and

current role of Katakana and KE in Japan; second, examine WEs: what they are, and whether KE qualifies as a WE; third, consider one university's effort to teach English from a WE perspective.

The Role of Katakana and Katakana-English in Japan

In the history of language in Japan, KE, referring to a recognizable variant of English common among native-Japanese speakers, is a relatively new term. Katakana, the angular Japanese script used to identify written loan words, is also commonly used as a loan-word pronunciation guide (Sheperd, 1996). But since Katakana and English contain substantially different sounds (especially vowels, consonant blends and final consonant phonemes), the unfortunate outcome of KE is utterances intended to be English that range from mildly confusing to completely incomprehensible (Walker, 2009).

But Japanese speakers should not be criticized for using Katakana as an English pronunciation guide—Katakana was originally *intended* as a pronunciation guide for Chinese character loan words! Transferring an existing pronunciation guide to a new set of western loan-words (of mainly English origin in the last 60 years) can only be viewed, from a social perspective, as a logical, efficient step. The communicative end result, however, has been unsatisfactory at best.

Historical Context

In the 9th century, “katakana syllabary was derived from abbreviated Chinese characters used by Buddhist monks to indicate the correct pronunciations of Chinese texts” (Ager, 2008). When Chinese loan-words began entering Japan, the world was a much smaller place, and interaction between nations and cultures was slow and gradual. Chinese characters were borrowed, assimilated and adapted; both written and spoken forms were modified as the loan-words became kanji—part of the Japanese language. Intercultural contact was extremely limited; indeed, did not occur at all except for small segments of business, religious and political classes. For the average citizen, there

was no leisure travel, no global media, no immediate contact of any kind with the world outside Japan. With time and isolated space, Chinese loan-words gradually entered Japan through religious, educational and diplomatic channels, slowly passed through government and social filters, and eventually became part of the common vernacular...by which point the loan-words were no longer loan-words—they had become Japanese kanji. For a millennium, furigana (phonetic kana script used to indicate pronunciation: whether katakana or, in modern times, hiragana in small type above/beside Chinese characters) was an effective tool in this slow, measured process of language assimilation (Hooker, 1996).

Modern Context

In 1854, however, Japan's world was radically altered; slow, measured processes seemed to disappear in an instant. Japan's social equilibrium was rocked by Commodore Perry's black ships, and has, in many ways, never recovered. Japan was propelled into the modern era, where travel, business, culture, technology and communication change at ever increasing speeds, and time and space contract accordingly.

It is in this modern social reality that Japan has dealt with English loan-words, and the method that was adequate for assimilating Chinese loan-words is clearly inadequate today. Katakana, a syllabary without a clear purpose after being superseded by hiragana for kanji pronunciation, was pressed into service for representing written western loan-words (*gairaigo*, or 'words from outside'). In ancient Japan, imported Chinese characters formed the foundation of written language, but by the 19th century the Japanese writing system was firmly established. If the historic Chinese loan-word method had been followed, English loan-words would have been written in roman alphabet, with small Katakana written above to indicate pronunciation. Whether such a method might have mitigated or exacerbated current problems related to KE will never be known, for it was never attempted. Instead, Katakana was chosen to *replace* all written *gairaigo*. This

single decision resulted in three serious consequences: first, the original English word has been removed from cognitive recognition; second, the ‘Katakanized’ word has been branded “forever foreign”; third (and perhaps most damaging communicatively), the Katakana script has been used as a pronunciation guide. (Sergeant, 2005; Walker, 2009)

What you see depends on your perspective

In Japan today, low levels of English achievement are a backdrop to any TEFL discussion, and communicative challenges connected with the use or misuse of Katakana are generally acknowledged. In many ways, educators look at Katakana as a communicative English barrier: a unique loan-word engine that facilitates wholesale borrowing of English words, yet perversely prevents the loan-words from ever being truly assimilated, while simultaneously mutating pronunciation so severely that KE speech becomes unintelligible (Walker 2009).

However, some linguists and educators look at KE in an entirely different light: not as a barrier to standard English communication, but rather as a World English—a dialect of English in its own right. When viewed as a WE, KE is part of the ongoing evolution of English as it expands far beyond the borders of England and the former British Empire, a merchant empire that seeded English as a mother tongue to hundreds of millions of people.

World Englishes: circles within circles

In 1985 Baj Kachru provided a simple, coherent structure for many disparate studies on the use of English in different parts of the world. With England at the center, Kachru visualized the global spread of English by placing countries in one of three concentric circles: inner circle, outer circle and expanding circle. The inner circle contains Great Britain, the USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand—countries where (conveniently ignoring the native inhabitants) English is both the language and the culture, and a majority of the early settlers arrived from Great Britain. Outer circle countries roughly correspond to the

outline of the British Empire—colonized countries such as India, Singapore, South Africa and Nigeria, where English became a common or even official language. (The Philippines is a special case, the only country where Spanish colonialism was supplanted by American cultural colonialism.) Although outer circle culture was not significantly Anglicized, in many cases English exerted a unifying force by bridging linguistic divides. The third circle, expanding circle countries, is the most elastic. The expanding circle contains countries where English is studied and used as a foreign language: China, Saudi Arabia, Indonesia, Japan, and many others. Kachru hoped that through research into the use and structure of English in outer and expanding circles, localized varieties of English would be better understood as not just variants of real British or American English, but rather as World Englishes—legitimate languages in their own right (Morrow, 2004; Miller, 2007).

Kachru’s three circles:

Kachru’s model, powerful in its simplicity, is widely referenced; although being a model, there are pieces that don’t seem to fit. English has become a lingua franca in many outer circle countries, but many

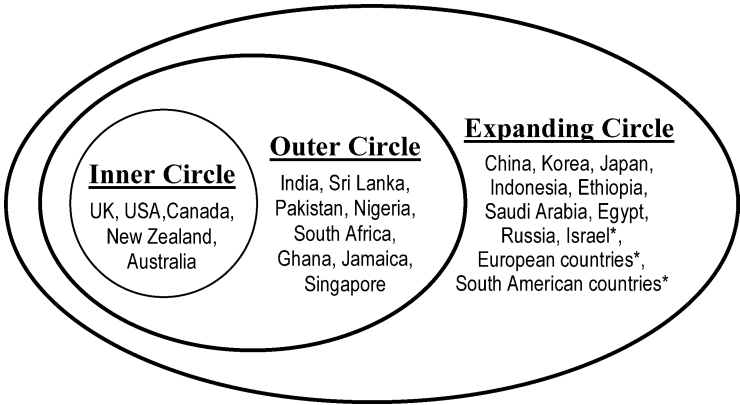


Figure 1

expanding circle countries are gradually using English in a very similar way. Is movement possible between outer and expanding circles, and would such movement be considered an advancement or a setback? Central and South American countries are former European colonies: English is used, but as an additional language, since Spanish or Portuguese is the lingua franca. Where do these countries fit? Should “old Europe” countries with historical English associations on both linguistic and cultural levels (such as France, Germany and Spain) be placed in the expanding circle?

Despite some loose pieces, Kachru’s model provides a useful framework for examining global English. Japan, on the basis of KE, is included in the expanding circle group of nations. But what does this designation tell us? How ‘expanded’ is the expanding circle? Inside the expanding circle, are there enough comparable traits to permit meaningful analysis, or is diversity—incomparable diversity—the defining characteristic? Is English in China comparable to English in Israel? Is English in Japan comparable to English in Germany?

Perhaps the problem is that, in the most *inclusive* view, Kachru’s expanding circle must be expanded enough to include every country in Asia, if not the whole world, for it may be impossible to find a nation where English is not taught at some level of education, used in some area of business, or spoken by some segment of society. But if the English spoken in every country is a WE, then the term loses all meaning. The expanding circle becomes a catch basin, a dark-pit category, a place to throw every country not already in the inner or outer circle. Kachru’s three-circles model was proposed only 25 years ago, but it already requires updating, as recent books by Kachru and others recognize (Bolton, 2006). There have been significant, even phenomenal changes in the global English landscape, with China standing out as one obvious example. Kachru’s three-circles model was published in 1985, which means that as he was gathering his data and formulating his concepts in the early 1980s, China was struggling to regroup from the ravages of the Cultural Revolution. 1985 was only

four years after the trial and conviction of the ‘Gang of Four’, roughly coinciding with Deng Xiaoping’s consolidation of political power and economic reform initiatives. Inclusion of English in the national curriculum was still in developmental stages (Hu, 2005). But today, with the total annual number of primary and secondary school students equal to the entire population of Japan, and English language instruction beginning in primary 3, English in China in no way resembles 1985 (China, Ministry of Education, 2008 statistics). In the last 25 years, has China achieved greater English communicative competence than Japan? Can either country be compared with countries in other recent intensive EFL-focus areas, such as the Middle East or Eastern Europe? The expanding circle is now overcrowded, with so much diversity between member countries that meaningful comparison is difficult: chaos resists analysis.

Beyond three circles: a linguistic atmosphere

Outside of the expanding circle, it may prove meaningful to define two additional levels of English use: the nebulous English cloud and a thinner English breeze. The English breeze blows everywhere, just as English as a foreign language is studied and spoken to some extent

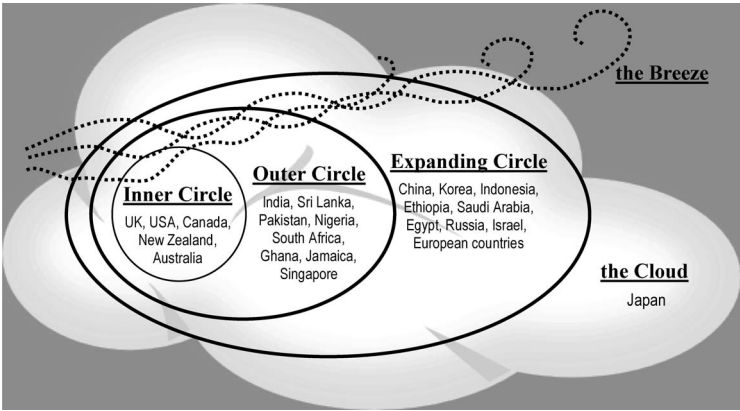


Figure 2

everywhere. But a breeze is intermittent, too insubstantial to be harnessed for any practical purpose. A cloud, on the other hand, has boundary and density and predictable behavior; it does interact with other natural forces and produce measurable output.

Countries in the English cloud use a limited, localized variant of English internally, in conjunction with the mother-tongue, for specific communicative purposes. '*Cloud English*' is not legitimate WE, although it may be on a WE development path. Katakana-English, I propose, exists in the cloud, not in the expanding circle. Figure 2 illustrates the English breeze and cloud. Japan, for reasons stated below, is placed in the English cloud. Determining additional countries in each category must be left for later analysis.

To be or not to be . . . a World English: 3 proposed Criteria

While reasons for including a country in the expanding circle of WEs are not easy to define, it seems illogical to include every country that has been touched, however slightly, by the global English breeze. The essential qualification is that a localized, recognizable variant of English must exist; but in order to be considered a legitimate WE, the following; criteria should also be true:

- 1) Regional Linguistic Context: Either (A) **or** (B)
 - (A) Two or more unique languages (or established, mutually unintelligible dialects) exist within the region.
 - (B) In the case of a single mother-tongue, English is used as a significant medium of communication *within* the country; not simply used for interaction with external non-English or English first-language countries.
- 2) Applied Communicative Focus in English Instruction:

English taught in school has application in society, and many students (measured by test scores or evidential successful communication) do in fact acquire at least functional proficiency in English.
- 3) The regional English (the WE variety) is comprehensible by

other English speakers. That is, the regional English is recognized *outside* of the region as a variant of standard English; and is comprehensible by both native-English speakers and non-native English speakers. A simple test of success for this criterion would be agreement that real communication is possible between speakers of the regional English and speakers of different WEs.

Is Katakana-English a World English?

Based on these 3 criteria, KE can not be considered a legitimate WE. To go over each point:

- 1) Regional Linguistic Context:
 - (A) Although there is some variation in accent and pronunciation within Japan, Japanese is the only language (excluding Ainu), and is standardized across the entire country.
 - (B) KE, while widely and creatively used in conjunction with Japanese, is not a coherent, independent or significant medium of communication within Japan among Japanese citizens.
- 2) Applied Communicative Focus in English Instruction:

Although the reasons are debated, there is general acknowledgment that English instruction in Japanese schools is inefficient and unproductive. Students do not acquire functional communicative proficiency, nor is English applicable in everyday society.
- 3) Inter-Regional English Comprehension:

On this criterion more than any other, KE is disqualified as a WE. ‘Good’ KE—KE which conforms to Katakana pronunciation and Japanese speech patterns—is often unintelligible by native-English speakers or non-native English speakers. KE is a perfectly acceptable and effective method of communicating within Japan; as such it can be considered a

sub-language—but a sub-language under the mother-tongue of Japanese, not English! KE facilitates the inflow of written English, and the discussion/dissemination of ‘foreign concepts’ within Japan (Stanlaw, 2004), but the discussion is conducted in Japanese, with KE used to identify and explain new ideas. A crucial point is that KE is used *between Japanese speakers*, not between Japanese speakers and English speakers from elsewhere in the world. This raises the question of whether English in Japan, in the form it is currently taught, is almost completely pointless (Walker 2009). Students, after devoting effort and energy to their study of English, end up with a sub-set of English that permits some level of functional competency in reading and listening and perhaps writing, but low-to-no functional competency in spoken communication. Even if KE gives the learner access to a wide range of English-origin vocabulary (Daulton, 1999), this vocabulary is useless if KE speech patterns are incomprehensible to native/non-native English speakers.

Recognizing KE: Pedagogical Implications

It is important to take a position on the issue of KE as a WE, for the position (the definition of KE that one holds) opens some doors of critical analysis while closing others, and strongly influences the pedagogical approach to EFL education in Japan.

- A) Viewed as a ***barrier to successful communicative English*** (or even more moderately viewed as a particularly challenging aspect of EFL acquisition), KE can be defined as a hindrance, and therefore can be analyzed with a view to overcoming/modifying/making changes. In the classroom, this means everything with regard to KE is ‘on the table’: restrict, prohibit, present effective alternatives. . . . The goal is to acquire English at a functionally proficient level, and if KE is a barrier, then it must be overcome or dismantled.

- B) Viewed as a *variety of WE*, KE becomes an organic presence, a communicative manifestation of a living culture, a localizing process that adapts English to the unique needs of Japan. KE is defined as a key aspect of a developing WE that will facilitate Japan's communication with the world. In the classroom, this means modifications are on the table, but restrictions or prohibitions are not. Far from being a barrier, KE, sometimes renamed "Japan English" (Crystal, 2003) is the English to acquire. To be sure, there is fine-tuning to be done and adjustments to be made, but educators are present to nurture the development of a young WE, not to impose the unattainable structure of old-world standard English.

Teaching English inside the circles


One example of a Japanese university embracing the WEs paradigm is Chukyo University, in Nagoya. The College of World Englishes was established in 1999, with "the philosophy of WEs... acting in an organic way to create a steady flow of new ideas and programs" (Sakai & D'angelo, 2005). Considering the name—The College of WEs—the embrace seems intimate; a decade after its establishment, however, it appears that the organic process has been constrained by organizational compliance and more traditional, functional objectives. In fact, even the name, the *College* of WEs may have been the working title of a pilot project, for the university homepage now, in 2010, states that "The School of WEs [was] inaugurated in April of 2002 as the tenth school in Chukyo University", containing both the Department of WEs and the Department of British and American Cultural Studies. Given that a characteristic of WE is the ability to communicate *within* the local region, the curriculum of the Department of WEs, "with the emphasis on communication in order to 'learn from the world and contribute to the world by making full use of English' " seems slightly out of place. There is no mention of English as a language within Japan. Furthermore, given another central element of WEs, insistence that there is no 'master

English', no ultimate standard of perfection, the following goal statement of the School of WEs (copied verbatim, see Picture 1, next page) is both an affirmation of WE doctrine and a potentially humorous Freudian slip:

The primary goals of the Department of World Englishes is the master of the English language itself, whereas the primary goal of Department of British and American Cultural Studies is to improve cultural understanding in English-speaking countries, as well as improve proficiency in the English language."

The first grammatical error (subject/verb agreement: "The primary goals. . . is. . .") does not impede intelligibility, and may be considered an example of the flexibility of a localized WE. The second error (noun form: "master of. . ." vs "mastery of. . .") is more puzzling: almost certainly the intended word is 'mastery', but a Freudian slip remains a possibility. The general, historical thrust in Japanese EFL education strives for accuracy "based on an American native speaker model" (Kirkpatrick, 2007), giving rise to the possibility that the 'master' is being pushed away and pulled closer, all at the same time!

Two other editing red flags, the missing article "the" before "Department of British and American Cultural Studies" and ambiguity of meaning in the goal statement (is the goal to improve Japanese students' understanding of British and American culture, or does the Department have a humanitarian mission to correct a cultural deficiency that pre-exists among Brits and Americans?) indicate that the paragraph was created by a native Japanese speaker for whom, along with many functionally bilingual compatriots, rules related to article and preposition usage remain an enduring mystery.



Message from the President

Message from the Chancellor

Organization

Undergraduate Schools

Graduate Schools

Research Institutes

Three Centers

Campus Tour

Continuing Higher Education

Admissions


International Center

School of World Englishes

Department of World Englishes

Department of British and American Cultural Studies

The School of World Englishes, inaugurated in April of 2002 as the tenth school in Chukyo University, has a curriculum with the emphasis on communication in order to "learn from the world and contribute to the world by making full use of English, a universal language". The primary educational goals of the Department of World Englishes is the master of the English language itself, whereas the primary goal of Department of British and American Cultural Studies is to improve cultural understanding in English-speaking countries, as well as improve proficiency in the English language. The School of World Englishes concentrates on student-oriented classes where those who receive an education are considered most important.



[Department of World Englishes]

This department is composed of three main programs.

- 1) The acquisition of practical English skills
A plethora of English classes are offered to help students develop active language skills, IT literacy, and media and business competence in addition English proficiency in other specialized fields.
- 2) Cross-cultural understanding
This program is designed to develop students' abilities communicate across cultures through the medium of the English language with minimal misunderstanding. Classes include Cross-cultural Understanding, Asian studies, Asian-English studies, Oceania studies, Japanese language teaching methods and exchanges with foreign universities.
- 3) Overseas training
Required courses include training in Singapore in the first year and training in English-spoken contries in the second year. Internatlnal interships is also offered to help students build their careers after graduation.

In our efforts to afford the best possible learning environment to our students, we have created a peer support system and augmented our campus with a Learning Support Wing annex (virtual English bloc).

Picture 1 English page: http://www.chukyo-u.ac.jp/eng/set_04.html

The website also illustrates the curiously contradictory high-status/low-status of English in Japan. English is high-status in the sense that it is an international language of business and politics; and regarded, at least superficially, as a symbol of knowledge and higher education. At the same time English is low-status (even 'no'-status!) in that it has no essential intra-Japan communicative purpose: all important information is conveyed in Japanese. Applied to the Chukyo University School of WEs, this means that the Japanese version of the homepage is the official homepage; the English homepage is peripheral,

seldom viewed by anyone connected to the university. This peripheral status allows errors (whether minor typos, major or even egregious mistakes) to pass unnoticed, or at least uncorrected.

Three examples:

- 1) “A plethora of English classes are offered to help students develop active language skills, IT literacy, and media and business *compentence* in *addiotion* English proficiency in other specialized fields.” (‘addiotion’ was intended to be ‘addition to’: transposed ‘to’ was inserted into the middle of ‘addition’)
- 2) “Classes include Cross-*cultural* Understanding...”
- 3) “...training in English-spoken *contries* in the second year. *Internatilnal* internships *is* also offered...”

World English / Accurate English

Do such errors matter? In the spirit of WEs, does accuracy become a relative concept, a ‘good enough’ condition? At what point is the unintelligibility border crossed? Given that the university states “This program is designed to develop students’ abilities communicate (sic) across cultures through the medium of the English language *with minimal misunderstanding*” (italics added), is it fair to doubt the success of the program? How is the level of ‘minimal’ determined?

Granted, doubting the success of the program based on the accuracy of the English language homepage would be presumptuous, mainly because the English language homepage is unofficial, a cosmetic flourish. The official homepage, the Japanese version, contains no grammar errors or ‘spelling mistakes’, for this is the official page—the page that matters.

HOME

学部紹介

入試情報

イベント情報

キャンパス紹介

就職・資格

HOME > 学部紹介 > 国際英語学部 英米文化学科 学科概要

学部紹介

国際英語学部 英米文化学科

学科概要

World Englishesの観点で文化を学ぶ

国際英語学部では、世界共通語をEnglishではなく国際英語＝「World Englishes」ととらえています。これは、イギリスやアメリカの標準英語を唯一と考えるのではなく、今や世界中に存在する多種多様な英語形態をそのまま認め合おうという考え方に基いたものです。このような考えの上に、英米文化学科では英米文化そのものと、それが各国文化にもたらす影響などを幅広く研究対象としています。



英文学の枠を越え、広く文化について研究

これまで一般的な英文学科では、文学研究を主体としてきました。しかし本学では英米文化学科として、文化や社会、ポピュラーミュージックや映画、演劇などの現代文化も題材とします。日本における英米文化の影響や、比較文化研究の立場から日本文化が英米でどう受け止められているかなどの研究も行うのが大きな特長です。地域・時代・ジャンルそれぞれについて、基礎から専門へと研究を深め、興味を持ったテーマについては2年次から所属するゼミナールにおいて、少人数クラスで深く掘り下げしていきます。

英語を自在に使いこなす能力を身につける

英語に接する機会が多いため高い英語力が身につくのも英米文化学科の特徴のひとつ。ネイティブスピーカーによる講義や海外セミナーで英米の文化に直接触れる機会もあります。科目選択の方法によっては、その約7割を英語で行われる授業にすることも可能です。

Picture 2 Japanese page: <http://nc.chukyo-u.ac.jp/gakubu/gaiyo/eibei01.html?id=chu10014>

No criticism of the university is intended—in this respect Chukyo University is no different from many other Japanese universities. The contrasting homepages simply highlight that English is *not* a significant language of communication *inside* Japan. Japanese language and culture, while not as homogeneous as popular perception might assume, is remarkably unified compared to other nations. Inner-circle English, the language of entrance exams, the unattainable pedagogical standard, is not a significant cultural medium of communication.

While success or failure of a WE program should never be inferred from website content, the seed of doubt planted by the embarrassing lack of proofreading on the English homepage may in fact have a real root. In a 2005 study, Hiroshi Yoshokawa, a professor at Chukyo University, found that students in the Department of WEs “believed that American and British English are the true models and native speakers are the best English teachers.” Ironically, after a year of instruction in the concepts of WE, including a three week training period at the Regional Language Center in Singapore to experience and study WE in action, second-year students “developed a stronger preference for traditional English varieties and conversely lower tolerance of other varieties of English” (Kawanami, 2009). Yoshikawa’s findings mesh with results from Kubota (1998) and Takeshita (2000) relating to two general perceptions in Japan: American or British English is the best English, and inability to speak English the way native-English speakers do is a cause for shame. An established WE, such as exists in Singapore, does not mimic American or British ‘best English’; and shame for being less than ‘best’, applied by Japanese to their own KE efforts, is a feeling easily transferred to WE speech from other countries.

Conclusion

KE, while firmly established in Japan and arguably an indispensable part of Japanese language, does not yet merit inclusion in the expanding circle of WEs. KE is more than a breeze in Japan; it exists in the English cloud. Just as a cloud contains energy and an essential resource, so too does KE. And just as a cloud combines basic natural elements to produce a downpour that, while refreshing in limited quantities, ultimately causes natural disasters, so too does KE combine basic elements of both English and Japanese to produce a linguistic outpouring that, while unique and fascinating, ultimately causes communicative disasters.

Such a conclusion in no way denies the influence of English on Japanese culture, in no way denigrates Japan’s remarkable, ‘open arms’

welcome to the English language. Working through the filter of Katakana, Japanese citizens have utilized English creatively and energetically, adapting and transforming both the language and aspects of the culture to suit specific needs. But, leaving the ‘cloud’ and changing metaphors, the point that must be kept in mind is that English is utilized “through the filter of Katakana”: a filter porous enough to permit entry, but constructed of a transformative material that fundamentally alters the language during passage, so that what emerges from the filtering process is often barely recognizable as what went in.

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Keywords

Katakana-English, world English, EFL in Japan, regional English, communicative ability